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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000051

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SUBJECT: BASRAH SADRIST: MOVEMENT DISARRAY AS IRAN GAINS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Howell Howard, Director, Regional Embassy Office
Basrah, Dept. of State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

11. (S/REL MCFI) SUMMARY: In a cordial yet at times confrontational meeting held May 23 at the Basrah Regional Embassy Office, OMS leader Sheikh Mohammed al-Faraji, Ayatollah Qassim al-Tai's purported representative in the five southern provinces, called the Charge of the Knights (COK) campaign "an Iranian operation conducted by Iraq." Sheikh Faraji alleged that COK was a politically motivated operation to cripple the Sadrist before the provincial elections, which would in turn pave the way for Iran's proxies, ISCI/Badr to dominate. Sharing examples of GOI persecution of Sadrists, Sheikh Faraji admitted that the movement was in complete disarray, indicating that if the status quo prevailed it might be impossible for the Sadrists to participate in upcoming elections. Harshly criticizing Muqtada al-Sadr (MAS) for betraying the movement by fleeing to Iran, Sheikh Faraji claimed that the moderate Sadrist leadership had distanced itself from MAS and his reckless policies. Sheikh Faraji said that he would like to continue dialogue with the U.S., as they were the only power capable of preventing Iraq from falling under the sway of the Iranians. END SUMMARY.

COK: POLITICALLY MOTIVATED OPERATION

12. (S/REL MCFI) During a meeting held at the Basrah Regional Embassy Office (REO) on Friday evening, May 24, Office of Muqtada al-Sadr (OMS) leader Sheikh Mohammed al-Faraji labeled the COK operation "an Iranian operation conducted by Iraq." He stated that Iranian fifth columnists had infiltrated JAM in order to discredit the Sadrist Trend. According to Sheikh Faraji, it was these militants, and not the moderate elements of OMS and JAM, who were responsible for the deteriorating security situation that had triggered COK. Claiming that despite their anti-CF stance, the moderate, mainstream leadership of the Sadrist Trend had abided by al-Sadr's renewal of the ceasefire; he argued that that the Prime Minister (PM), heavily influenced by his coalition partners ISCI/Badr, had used COK as an instrument for trying to wipe out the Sadrists.

13. (S/REL MCFI) Sheikh Faraji said that the Iranians, working through the "Special Groups" (SG), had infiltrated the Sadrists because they viewed them as threat to their designs on southern Iraq. Positing that prior to COK, SG "Sahab" groups had been tasked to eliminate moderate Sadrist leaders as well as attack the GOI and CF, he added that it was these elements that had disregarded Muqtada al-Sadr's (MAS) extension of the cease-fire in order to draw the GOI and CF into open conflict with the Sadrists. This was part of Iran's grand plan, in that eliminating the Sadrists would remove the only significant election opposition to their proxies, the "House of Five," a local term for the ISCI/Badr/Hizbollah/Sayyed

al-Shuhadah(SAS)/Tharallah bloc.

¶4. (S/REL MCFI) When pressed by the REO Director to provide more evidence to support claims that the COK had been conducted by the PM and the GOI for political reasons, the previously calm Sheikh Faraji grew extremely agitated, questioning why other militias and criminals have not been arrested in Basrah, including those linked to the "House of Five," and Fadhila. (Comment: He has a point; REO is unable to get ISF in Basrah to disclose the names of any SAS members ISF have arrested. End Comment.) Indicating that as a result of the GOI's crackdown, the local Sadrism movement is in complete disarray, Sheikh Faraji revealed that many of its leaders have fled to Iran, Lebanon, Syria, as well as the UAE, while those who have not been arrested have gone underground. He also alleged that the ISF have shut down OMS offices and mosques, and he recounted an episode from earlier in the day when ISF troops had roughed up a group of 1,000 Sadristes attempting to pray in the 5-Mile (Basrah City's northernmost) Section. (Note: REO Director asked the new Basrah Police Chief about this incident on May 29 [Septel] but the Chief clearly did not want to discuss it. End Note.)

ELECTION PROSPECTS

¶5. (S/REL MCFI) Asked by the REO Director and Poloff whether the local Sadristes planned to participate in the upcoming provincial elections, an exasperated Sheikh Faraji replied, "How can we? All of our leaders have either been arrested, fled the country, or are in hiding." Injecting a bit of humor into the conversation, he added jokingly, "but we are not going to join ISCI/Badr." On a more serious note, he argued that if the status quo prevailed, he doubted that he would be able to hold his followers together, and he expressed concern that Iran would try to co-opt the remaining Sadristes in Basrah and the south. If this happens, ISCI/Badr, and by extension, the Iranians, will dominate the local elections, and, in his estimation, Basrah and the rest of southern Iraq would soon be under Iranian sway.

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MUQTADA'S BETRAYAL AND A REQUEST FOR DIALOGUE WITH THE CF

¶6. (S/REL MCFI) Strongly criticizing Muqtada al-Sadr, Sheikh Faraji that Muqtada had betrayed the movement when he fled for Iran, adding that he will care again about Muqtada "when he comes back to Iraq." He continued that most of the moderate elements within the Sadrist harbor tremendous resentment towards MAS for what they consider reckless leadership. The moderate Sadristes had rallied around Ayatollah Qassim al-Taie, the OMS cleric in Najaf who Faraji claimed to be a strong proponent of Iraqi Arab nationalism, and not a puppet of the Iranians, as he labeled Grand Ayatollahs Sistani and Hakim.

¶7. (S/REL MCFI) Legitimately claiming that he had risked his life to meet with the REO Director and Poloff, Sheikh Faraji added that he had "come to a crossroads, with the Iranians on one side and the Americans on the other." Stating that never in his life did he imagine that one day he would be sitting across the table from Americans, he continued that he would like to continue a dialogue with the U.S, as it was now the only force that could prevent Iraq from falling under Iran's sway. Adding that though there are many moderates within the movement who would like to engage with the U.S., many remain unconvinced that the Americans are serious about engaging them; the current environment makes it extremely dangerous for Sadristes to talk to the U.S. inside Iraq. That said, he indicated a strong desire to meet again in the future.

¶8. (S/REL MCFI) COMMENT: REO Basrah has been trying to draw in Faraji for many weeks. Our only previous Sadrist contact fled Iraq for Kuwait after SG targeted him for assassination (for meeting with us), although he remains in contact with us (Reftel). The intermediaries we have been using to attract Faraji were successful in large part because of the Sadrist desperation after COK. Before COK, one could say that there had been an uneasy balance in Basrah province among Fadhila, OMS/JAM

and ISCI/Badr/SAS, punctuated by regular assassinations. With that balance upset, Sadrists probably hope to get CF, if not on their side, then at least to recognize a common enemy in the Iranian backed parties/militias. One of his comments was telling, if chilling: "we aren't the only ones who have been killing CF, so have SAS and Badr." REO will continue to engage with Sadrists when possible, but at a discreet tempo as our contacts (and our interpreter) still report Badr agents (in ISF uniforms) are manning the entry gate into the Basrah Air Station.

HOWARD